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ESSAY ON FAITH.

BY

WILLIAM SCARNELL LEAN, M.A.

(Read at the Friends' Meeting House, Westminster, Feb. 14, 1865.)

LONDON:

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ESSAY ON FAITH.

It is my object to endeavour to illustrate as simply as possible the reasonableness of Faith considered as a religious principle; yet not as an abstract principle only, but as an actually existing attribute of a soul which is consciously dependent on a living and present God; and which, in consequence of this dependence, puts forth certain well-defined energies in direct obedience to that higher power which it loves to obey. We may be painfully conscious that to be persuaded of the reasonableness of ever so good a thing does not necessarily ensure our practising it, liable as we are to have our judgment blinded by the glitter of apparent and immediate enjoyments, the grasping of which may preclude our acceptance of the other good thing set before us. Above all, we may be painfully conscious how far the head is from the heart, and how the one may yield a temporary assent, while the other refuses to be softened. Nevertheless, believing that influences for good flow in upon the religious life by various channels, we may hope that every line of thought that leads at last to Christ, is one of the myriad threads by which it is well if we are discovering ourselves to be bound to the realities of the world to come.

How real that world is,—how supremely worthy of our best thoughts its infinite realities are, beyond anything that earth bestows, I suppose that even the best of men can but faintly conceive! But how constantly we find that even benighted hearts are willing to believe, while so many of the things around them are daily seen to be temporal and transient, that there are things

which are not seen, which are eternal. Is it at all strange that it should be so? If He is an Infinite Being who has made us, and we are finite, limited in mental apprehension as in every other respect, is it strange that the boundless circuit of His universe should include much which is none the less real and enduring because it is beyond the range of our conceptions? Rather it is reasonable to expect that, multitudinous as are the thoughts of man upon things which are within his power to conceive, there may lie beyond him a world of thought and of the materials for thought, in comparison of which the little sum of his knowledge is as a drop in the ocean. And may we not say that it is reasonable moreover to expect that it should be within the counsels of the Infinite God, firstly, to allow a few glimpses of a very little of this higher world to man's unassisted intelligence, secondly, to reveal to man another part which he could not have conceived unaided, and lastly, to withhold from his view a very large part which it would not profit him to behold as yet?

It would be a strangely perverse state of mind in a finite being, constantly reminded of the limitation of its powers in every direction, that should refuse to believe in the existence of anything beyond its own immediate sphere; and it would be equally strange if such a being should perversely refuse to believe in the possibility of a faint description being imparted to it, by one knowing these things beyond, of their character, and even of their bearing and influence, however mysterious, upon its own existence. But there is nothing strange in men's believing one who is duly authorised to tell them of things beyond their own experience; and so there is something most reasonable in that religious faith which consists in a spiritual apprehension and conviction of

some of the things unseen, simply revealed according to the good pleasure and by the perfect wisdom of their very Author, the revelation being all the while fully attested by the very spirit of truth. The simple faith which begins with a firm persuasion that possibilities are not to be measured by the extent to which our finite notions can reach, is that which is nearest to a settled conviction of the supreme reality of the unseen; while the consciousness that there is so much which it is entirely beyond its power to comprehend unaided, helps to keep the soul in which such a faith dwells humbly dependent and patiently waiting for further revelations of the higher good. The very feeling of its powerlessness to satisfy its own cravings goes far towards giving it rest; for it hereby tacitly acknowledges that its supplies depend on the free bounty of Him who reveals more and more of His secret things according to the need, and according to the power to bear them.

What can be more reasonable than that the creature should trust in the power and goodness and love of its Creator? what can be more reasonable than that man should "have faith in God"? And yet if the precept to have faith in God were carried out into practice as uniformly as the mere reasonableness of the service would prescribe,—if man were not warped aside from this perfect trust by manifold temptations to substitute the guidance of present apparent pleasure for that of future promised good,—we should not have cause from time to time to ponder over again the grounds of our confidence, and to justify this very reasonableness of faith by considering how suitable it is to all the relationships of a man to God and to his fellow-men. That there is a good deal however which resists the maintenance of faith in God, is no objection to the wisdom

of the endeavour to maintain it; there would be no noble endurance in the world, if the right never had to be held against error; trials would be things all of gloom, if nothing good were ever tested; the energy of conflict is in the hope of rest; victory is not the only reward of battle; an access of confidence in the captain of the host is grateful to the true-hearted soldier, even when gained amidst reverses. But all comes out into view most clearly,—not that excellence of faith only which commends itself to the judgment, but the satisfaction also (and this in the highest sense) which it yields to the heart, together with its power to win the obedience of the will,—when presented simply in its true colours as one of the most distinguishing features of the Gospel of Christ. The prominent position which is there assigned to what I may be allowed to call the Practice of Faith, may perhaps be suitably glanced at without attempting anything like a review even of its most important consequences, such for instance as that called justification by faith, a formal and creed-like presentation of which is distasteful to any who feel strongly the wide difference between theology and religion.

Allusion has been made to those sovereign words, “Have faith in God.” They are words spoken by Jesus Christ. And what does the voice from heaven say of Jesus? “This is my beloved Son, hear Him.” Here then is harmony at once, at the very outset; the mutual testimony of the Father and the Son, proclaiming the necessity of simple faith in the Father and in the Son. To have faith in God is to have faith therefore in Christ: and really we might almost say that God has thus condescended to the weakness of our nature, which desires objects of sight above everything, in that the simple faith which trusts fully the goodness and love of the

invisible God, receives in His well-beloved Son a supreme object for its constant contemplation, embracing all the realities of highest worth which a soul can crave to rest upon, offered to it in no poor form of conceptions of the intelligence, but in all the actual perfection of a holy life. But to have faith in Christ for *all* things requires that we not only contemplate His glory, but that we trust in His righteousness. Indeed we do not begin to conceive even faintly the chief excellence of His glory, till we know the great things which His righteousness can do for us. To know these great things is to have been sensible of our own need of them; to confess to our need in our very heart of hearts, when alone before God, brings us to a low place, a place of hopelessness in one regard, namely as to ourselves, but the starting-point of the best hope in another regard, namely as to the mercy of God through Jesus; for here it is that the simplest and best faith has power, its virtue being all of God, whose Spirit quickens the consciousness of the need and the sight of the deliverance which is at hand. And then begins that simple union between the Saviour and the believing soul, with which none may intermeddle, a holy confidence which springs from a holy love, a faith "which worketh by love," and therefore works with power. Would that the profession of the Christian name were constantly accompanied by the child-like devotedness of the true confidence in Christ! What a hearty obedience we sometimes feel must be really involved in it, an obedience too poorly yielded! Not merely an attention to what an intellectual belief might lead to, but the reasonable service rendered to the Master whose love wins loving obedience in return. And first the daily dependence upon Him; for if we really began by going to Him for all our

righteousness, not first preparing ourselves just a little in some fancied way to make ourselves more fit to go ; then we shall never be able to find worthiness in ourselves, however and whenever tempted to look for any there, but shall endeavour in the matter of righteousness, as for all besides, to "hold the beginning of our confidence" in Him "steadfast unto the end." Then we shall feel more fully the deep meaning of the heavenly invitation, "This is my beloved Son, hear Him ;" we shall feel how in these words all the promises of Jesus are offered for our full and free acceptance ; we shall be prepared to apprehend them as our own simply because He has spoken them, and they will become precious to us for His sake ; and lastly, from this same loving obedience will spring the belief of all His revelations of truth, whether more or less mysterious, that only belief of Christian doctrine which is worthy to be entertained by Christians, because it rests for its worthiness upon the simple teaching of the Master Himself. The Scriptures will be dear to us in proportion as we find revealed in them the mind of Christ ; and the unfolding of the mind of Christ will be to us the measure of the value of all the secret operations of the Spirit of God, whose guidance will be none the less esteemed when extended through the simplest influences of His providence, and none the less real when most mysterious and least perceptible by our bodily senses. The unity of the work of Father, Son and Spirit, will at times become to us a sacred and pleasing contemplation ; and we shall sometimes long to surrender ourselves in faith to its gentle persuasive power. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth ; so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

It is an almost obvious remark that with all true faith in God there will be found humility. At least, wherever humility is not, there some degree more or less marked of faith in ourselves is present, excluding for the time our trust in God. But where the humility of faith is found, there the prayer of faith will also be. The looking upwards will be a thing of so much actual experience, that nothing will be more suitable to such an attitude of soul, than in everything to make actual request unto God for the blessings for which we trust Him. We shall ask Him moreover for his constant favour to help us to maintain this very trust; we shall pray for grace to increase our faith; and surely the man that prays in the humility of simple faith is the one who may most reasonably expect the open reward in answer to his most secret prayer. Meanwhile he will have patience, which is the energy of hope; and his hope will be a cheerful one for the most part, not only of that great end of his faith, the salvation of his soul, but also of the working together of all things for his present and future good.

And there will be a present reward. I have already said that the very feeling of powerlessness in a soul to satisfy its own cravings is a good preparation for receiving the gift of rest. How much more, when the security of the trust reposed in the Saviour has been tested, will the deep peacefulness of the Christian's faith appear! We may believe those who have known the most of it, when they tell us that faith has power to bring peace not only in respect of the reconciliation wrought through Jesus, but also in relation to the cares and even sorrows of daily life. It is a shield able to resist the darts which a cruel enemy charges with the fire of fierce temptation; and it is a cover from the

tempest of affliction, and a shadow from the scorching, parching blasts of the world's anxieties. In the time of mourning it cheers human nature's failing heart, whispering, while the tear-drops fall in silence in the sight of the chastening God, "He doeth all things well." In regard to others, it gives confidence, and represses the spirit of harsh judgment; it rejoices in the faith of other faithful; and, having its own deep roots in love, it throws the veil of charity over many weaknesses of the erring. By experience it learns that very much that is lamentable is overruled by Him whose "tender mercies are over all His works;" it sees that He can make even the wrath of man to praise Him, and that the remainder of wrath He can restrain. In all these things the work of that righteousness which comes by faith is "peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever."

So that in this way, if in no other, faith is productive of a great reward. How it adds its chief excellence to all other fruitfulness in the world's harvest field; how it nerves to every effort in the cause of Christ, by making the work His, confiding to Him the preparation of the soil, and the supply of the increase, is best known to those who have nothing but a willing heart to bring to His service, with the dedication of the strength of their days. How many of the things done by Christians simply from love to Christ continue to seem foolishness and weakness in the eyes of the world! And it is very true that in many cases the workers themselves will be the first to confess that the works are weak and base, and almost like "things that are not;" but it is the faith that penetrates them which gives them a soul to live, and it is in the power of this faith that the Christian has faith, not careful that men

approve the means he employs, but ever careful to pray to his God for a blessing upon his feeble endeavours to labour in His name, while obeying His call to enter into the vineyard and work.

It is generally found to be profitable, when a somewhat abstract subject is under consideration, to furnish practical examples of the operation of the principles discussed; but in the case before us the very fact that instances might be given in such lengthy lists, (commencing with that goodly catalogue of men of faith contained in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews), seems to relieve me from the necessity, and to diminish the probable advantage of doing so. The general character of such examples is known beforehand to be such as appears with more or less distinctness in the case of every Christian of whom we hear or read. I prefer therefore, without bringing forward many names, to refer a little more particularly to the nature of some of the circumstances which call for the exercise of faith, and to a false notion which some who do not understand the Christian's faith are apt to entertain of the actions into which it leads him.

It is probably in consequence of a narrow and partial view of the power of this principle, that so many even of good men have distrusted the prudence, to say the least, and the practicability of obeying fully some of our Lord's positive commands. Therefore when some have been known to act up to a conviction that they could not, without direct disobedience to that Master in whom they trust for all besides, ever be induced by any consideration of so-called safety to take away a fellow creature's life, there have been numbers who have asked, "How do you think society would get on if all adopted this plan?" Now, the false notion which lies

concealed in this question I take to be this ; it looks upon the particular course of action into which his faith has led a particular Christian, as a *plan* adopted at pleasure, and to be continued or not according to its success. Whereas the practice of faith is anything but a thing of experiment ; granted that his experience will justify the wisdom of the believer's confidence ; but the believer does not begin at this end of the matter. He may have a firm trust that his own faith would be good for society at large, but he does not wait till any given number of men come to an agreement to follow any particular mode of proceeding before he adopts it, if he believes that his Master prescribes it for him. And as to the results of what he does in this obedience, he has heard the words (and he believes them), "According to thy faith be it unto thee." So that it would be no surprise to him if disasters should follow, if society at large adopted any course with no faith in individuals leading them to adopt it ; and he is not careful to prophesy how it will be in the case of others, before he himself walks in what he believes to be the way of his Lord's requiring. Faith first, and then the walk by faith ; first the obedience to the Master, and then the reflection whether or no it was safe to obey Him ; this is the order of things, from which we may be sure it is only the weakness of our nature and our shortsightedness that tempts us to swerve.

The power of faith will be largely in proportion to the use made of it in times of need. Its power has been often tested by our fellow-members in times of war in various lands : in Ireland during the rebellion, and very recently by some in America. In times of peace Christians everywhere have tested its power, the results being only of a more conspicuous character in

some cases than in others. There is but one faith for believers ; and it is the same faith, so far as its nature goes, that in the case of the Christian who works with his hands, looks for a blessing upon his daily toil in answer to the prayer, " Give me this day my daily bread," and that in the case of one or two, led like the founder of the Orphan Asylum at Bristol into a very peculiar path, waits till the hearts of others are inclined by the Father of all to send the sustenance which the orphans need. It is said in this case too, and, as the remark is probably meant, it is said with reason, " It would not do for all to act in this way." And simply because the Master does not call all in this way. But if it is said, " It would not do for all to trust to faith for their living," the remark must hardly be allowed to pass. Faith in the Heavenly Father who assigns us our share of toil, will be found to add its sweetest relish to our daily bread ; and the worth of faith in this regard was surely contemplated by Him who, seeing the end from the beginning, knew that some of His children would need the support of faith to carry them through their honest daily labour, and bade them consider how the fowls neither have store-house nor barn, and yet the same Heavenly Father feedeth them, and asked, " Are ye not much better than they ?" While nothing can release a man from the duty of putting forth his own best exertions on his own account, nothing can release him from the position of a dependent being, who does not create but receives his daily possessions.

Faith is called into exercise and its sufficiency to support a man is exemplified in very different circumstances in the case of different believers. Some men find trials of their faith in things through which many have passed before them without being brought to any

straits at all. These trials are partly according to education, but more often they are according as the eye is more or less enlightened to discern good from evil in little things, and the understanding quickened to perceive the dividing line between right and wrong action in the common occurrences of daily life. Great scrupulousness will not always be the result of narrow-mindedness; and very ordinary things may try the faith of the Christian, especially the early faith of the young Christian. We are told in the memoir of Thomas Pumphrey,* that "before commencing business in Worcester, it was necessary for him to become a free-man of the city; but in taking up his freedom a difficulty presented, which appeared to him almost insurmountable. The document which he had to sign contained an article requiring that 'a lawful weapon for the defence of the city' should be kept: this he believed to be little more than nominal, but still he felt it would be inconsistent with his principles to subscribe to it, and he expected that in consequence he would be prevented from taking up his freedom; he made it a subject of earnest prayer, which was answered in a striking manner; for when the official on reading the document came to these words, he at once and spontaneously said, 'It is no use reading this to you; I will strike it out.'" Now Thomas Pumphrey was doubtless not the first Christian that had ever taken up his freedom in Worcester; and yet it is nothing to the point that no one before him may have felt the difficulty which presented to him; it is enough to notice, without questioning the reasonableness of the scruple, that to him there was a trial of faith involved, and to see that when a man of faith is brought into any such pass, in

* Memoir of Thomas Pumphrey, edited by John Ford, p. 11.

however ordinary a matter, his prayer of faith has power, and it ends in peace.

I believe it is said with great justice, that buoyant as the heart of childhood is, the trials incident to childhood are very sharp to some children. I believe that the struggle to maintain their little faith is often very real, very sincere, and maintained not without many hard conflicts and with much simple prayer in the case of many very youthful Christians. And it is of little use that less scrupulous schoolfellows tell these, as I have known them do, that So and So, of riper years, says they are too particular, boys will be boys, and they had better join with them, or at least wink at what they are doing, and not distress themselves. There is a clearer witness for truth than any well-meaning prudent advisers can be, whispering more constantly, in words of deeper love, approval or condemnation of the conflicting courses of conduct that may be suggested to them. And by this teaching some of these young hearts do choose to abide; it costs them something; it is a trial of faith to them; their probation has begun, and so has the power and the reward of their confidence in Him who they know has said, "Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." They remember the faith of Samuel, and of Daniel, and their lessons of obedience and prayer, and, trusting that the Lord is calling them also, they will follow while they may. Any who may think with reason that they see a needless amount of scrupulousness in cases of this kind, need nevertheless a spirit of wisdom to deal successfully with them; and probably in the greater number of such instances there is more to call for gladness than for pity on the part of those who watch them, and for much care lest in their

wish to make them manly, they do anything to overthrow the faith of some of the Saviour's own disciples.

There is a kind of trial connected with the judgment which is passed on our actions by others; a trial of faith which cannot be always very easily set aside by the simple reflection that we care not "to be judged of man's judgment," however correct a principle this may be for one who is well persuaded that his steps are ordered of the Lord. This kind of trial comes into operation in connexion with a question of conformity or non-conformity to certain visible modes or practices. But it has this peculiarity about it, that Christians are equally liable to it whether they conform or do not conform to the practices in connexion with which it arises; and this is the case simply because, whatever a man's practice may be, his motives are equally liable to misconception by the worldly-minded. A Christian can deny himself of nothing, but the world can call him an ascetic or a Pharisee; a Christian can allow himself nothing which is lawful to him, but the world may tell him he is self-indulgent and inconsistent. How forcibly does our Lord bring this evil-eyed judgment of the world into view when he says, "But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the market, and calling unto their fellows, and saying, We have piped unto you and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children." The world likes conformity; it likes fashions; it likes what is fashionable. Christianity calls for obedience to the

will of God. And this will, as revealed to men through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, may lead one Christian in one direction and one in another, while both are equally treading a path that will bring them to heaven. It is true that Christ is the one living way ; but, while all His followers have but one path to tread in this sense, there are nevertheless permitted differences in the circumstances of different followers of the same Lord, which, especially to the eye of the outward observer who sees not the heart, where the work of self-denial, of repentance, of acceptance and belief of the truth must be essentially the same, wear the aspect of diversities so great as at times to appear to contradict the principles which each alike professes to follow. And it is because the world, which walks by sight, cannot understand these diversities of operation, that it is so ready to turn to one and say, Why do not you dance ? while it says to another in the same breath, Why do not you lament ? The world has no faith whereby to explain such differences to its satisfaction. Indeed the world cannot be satisfied with the believer's reason for his course of life, because it is dissatisfied with itself. The world is not at ease with itself ; so, to gain a temporary recreation or relief, it changes its modes ; it sets its fashions anew ; and all the worldly change with it, and complain of those who do not act in conformity with them and yet are at peace. Now John the Baptist, partaking of the character of the old prophets, of the Elijahs who were at the same time teachers and signs to the people, was divinely led into the wilderness, and came "neither eating nor drinking ;" and the world condemned his manner of life. Our blessed Lord came fulfilling all righteousness ; He also went through all scenes of

human life, yet without sin ; and He “ came eating and drinking.” The world equally condemned His manner of life. Doubtless it felt His reproaches ; felt His holy example ; and, not yielding to His teaching, strove to disprove the truth of His mission. “ If He be so and so,” they said, “ why doth He eat with publicans and sinners ? ”

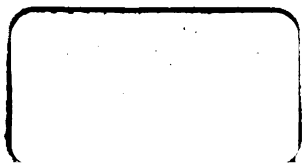
Now, because the Christian walks by faith and not by sight, he is not careful to give a reason for all his acts to worldly critics ; but he needs the greater faith to enable him to pursue the path which is peculiarly his own. And what if his path does now and then run beside that of the worldling ? Such will be very ready then to exclaim, “ Oh ! now you are walking our way ! How do you explain this ? You have no objection to what we are now doing ; it happens to suit your taste, we suppose ; be consistent, pray, with yourself.” What indeed is there now for him but, with all due care to avoid every appearance of evil, to pray for still more faith that he may hold on his way bowing to no side ? He knows that it is not for the sake of conformity that he now approaches the path of the world, any more than it was because he aimed at being a solitary that at one time he neither ate nor drank, or because he was a gluttonous man that at another he refused none of these things. He trusts moreover that even in his case that wisdom will be justified which is not wilful, but “ pure, peaceable, and easy to be entreated, without partiality and without hypocrisy.”

And this leads to one concluding remark as to a caution bearing upon this part of the subject. Whatever be the Christian's liberty, it can never rightly lead him to put a stumbling-block or an occasion to fall in a brother's way. “ Hast thou faith ? Have it to thy-

self before God." Oh ! the magnanimity of the Apostle, who would debar himself from much that was quite lawful for him rather than make his brother to offend ! Such considerateness is all one with the real humility of the best faith, which would lead us to measure the expediency of lawful things by the degree to which they promote the well-being of others. It is a part of the charity that "is not puffed up," and "seeketh not her own."

It appears then that faith, which is a reasonable thing considered as a mere state of the mind or attitude of the soul of a finite being, is also a thing most practically fruitful of real rewards, and, even when most tried, intimately connected with some of the most substantial blessings. How abundantly might further direct testimony to all the truths which have been but weakly supported in the foregoing remarks, be adduced from the pages of Holy Scripture. How express is its declaration, that the trial of the Christian's faith is "much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire ;" and how does it hold out the hope that it will be found "unto praise, and honour, and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ !" And meanwhile its exceeding preciousness is to be known in part by its power to lay hold of that righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ "from faith to faith ;" bringing a man to the only place where he can feel the rock beneath him, and from whence he can go on from strength to strength, appropriating by virtue of the same holy power that first quickened him to a sense of his weakness, a supply of all the further support which his constant necessities require. To be thus dependent, but supported by such

power as this, is far better than to try to walk alone by the light of our own philosophy of life, which light is sure to go out in darkness and leave us stumbling among the graves. Every one is tempted to make a philosophy of life for himself,—the poor man is apt to say that he tries to do his duty, and that God is merciful; the decent man will say that he loves mercy and humility, and he seeks to be amiable and moral;—each is alike mistaken, and the light of each must one day go out in gloom. How blessed is that Spirit which discovers the darkness in time, which raises the agonizing cry for light while yet it may be heard, which reveals the Saviour, commends the love of God, and baptizes the forgiven soul with the waters of regeneration, giving it the light of life, and fellowship with all those who forsake the ways of their own choosing, wherein there was no true peace. “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”



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